

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Thirsting for God September 24, 2000 John M. Buchanan

"...What am I really saying, when I call You my God, the God of my life? ...Are there any titles which I needn't give You? ... If I should take my stand on the shore of Your Endlessness and shout into the trackless reaches of Your Being all the words I have ever learned in the poor prison of my little existence, what should I have said? I should never have spoken the last word about You ...God of my life, Incomprehensible, be my life. God of my faith, who leads me into Your darkness—God of my love, who turns Your darkness into the sweet light of my life, be now the God of my hope, so that You will one day be the God of my life, the life of eternal love.

Karl Rahner
Encounters with Silence

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THIRSTING FOR GOD

September 24, 2000

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 6: 1-8

John 4: 1-15

**“O God, . . . my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land.”
(Psalm 63:1) NRSV**

O God, our souls thirst for you. With the ancient Psalmist we confess our longing to know you, to love you, and to live in communion with you. And so we come here today, again. Startle us with your truth and open our hearts and minds and souls to your word, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Do you remember Check Point Charlie? For years during the Cold War, Check Point Charlie was in the news daily—the military intersection where any traffic traveling from West Berlin to East Berlin—the Communist sector—and back had to be checked for proper authorization, often searched and either allowed to proceed or forced to turn back; where West German and American troops encountered East German guards and their Soviet Allies.

Today the wall is gone; there is one unified Berlin, the capital of one unified Germany; the Cold War is over and Check Point Charlie remains as a reminder: the command post, with its warning signs and sand bags—stands curiously in what has become a normal urban thoroughfare.

We were there two weeks ago with a group of 47 Presbyterians on a study tour of Germany and the Czech Republic. There is a small museum at Check Point Charlie containing thousands of pictures and artifacts from the East German population’s relentless attempt to escape to West Berlin. An automobile, with a special space hollowed out under the back seat for hidden passengers, two suit cases—joined—to bring a West Berliner’s sweetheart back to his arms. A hot air balloon which ferried 37 people over before it was detected. An old upright radio with space inside for one escapee. Ladders, ropes and tunnels—dug laboriously for months beneath the streets. And of course the failed attempts—the men, women and children shot and killed trying to climb the wall, including one young man shot by East German guards and left to bleed to death for eight hours.

It was a sobering but deeply moving testimony to something in the human spirit that cannot be smothered, stamped out or destroyed, something beautifully human that will not be extinguished.

And then the wall came down and the communist government crumbled. Germany was reunited and East Berliners were free and the celebration at the wall produced deeply human moments of love and joy and pride. Who will ever forget the television images of thousands of young people with candles standing on the wall, families reunited? The most poignant picture of all in the museum was of a lone man playing a cello, seated in front of the now-breached wall. It was Mstislov Rostapovich, the distinguished Russian cellist. It was his eloquent gesture of joy and hope and he was, I recall, playing the music of the great German composer, J. S. Bach.

There is something about the human spirit that refuses to be quenched, some hunger—thirst that will not be denied, something profoundly spiritual that, down through history, ultimately survives,

lives, grows, prospers and overcomes every attempt to stamp it out. And it expresses itself most frequently and most eloquently and most courageously in religion and in art.

Not that political tyrants haven't tried to stamp it out. Dictators hate the theologians and the artists and often try to throw them both in jail. There is something about religion and art that tyrants can't control and therefore cannot tolerate. Hitler tried to tame the churches and allowed only Nazi approved art to be displayed publicly. The same was true in both the former Soviet Union and is true today in China. Not long ago China was jailing people for playing the kind of music Mr. Brubeck will play here this evening.

We visited Leipzig, formerly in East Germany, the city where J. S. Bach worked as organist, chorale master and composed much of his glorious music, one chorale per week for the weekly Sunday liturgy in the city's Protestant churches. The East German authorities were embarrassed by the presence of a magnificent historic Gothic church on the campus of Leipzig University and announcing that there was no place for a church in an officially atheistic university, simply blew it up and replaced it with a gray administration building. The East German Communists tried everything they could think of to discourage religion while preserving the façade of freedom. Churches were destroyed or turned into museums. Church operated schools were simply appropriated by the state, seminaries closed, books and literature and hymnals and bibles banned and most costly of all, known church members were kept from important professions and jobs, and their children denied entrance to college or university.

The Marxists assumed that under the new socialist system, religion would be seen to be false, unnecessary, the "opiate of the people," and as the old ones died out, would simply fade away.

What they didn't count on, of course, was the resilience of the human spirit—and—the arts. They actually encouraged the performance of classical music, much of it based on religious themes and scripture. Big mistake! Somebody must have forgotten to read the words. In Leipzig, the city where J. S. Bach played and conducted and wrote, people went to churches every day to hear the music, concerts, recitals, almost all of it based on the great theological themes of Christian faith. Bach lovers from all over the world continued to go to Leipzig, to the churches, because of the music. And so, it was no coincidence that it was the city of J. S. Bach and the church where he frequently played, that first sheltered political dissidents. It was Nicolae Kirche where hundreds and then thousands of East Germans gathered and from which they marched, holding candles, out into the old square, filling the city streets and then the ring road around their city, as the Communist regime began to fall. We discovered the same phenomena in Prague, capital of the new Czech Republic. After forty years of relentless persecution and repression, churches in the city are full of people listening to music. There are literally hundreds of concerts and recitals weekly in Prague, on every street corner, it seemed, most of them in church buildings, most of them religious music.

I found myself musing that it is the musicians' and artists' turn to carry the religious enterprise for a while until the church gets itself back together. Just as the church gave Bach and Vivaldi and Haydn and Handel and Michelangelo and Bernini and Caravaggio the venue for their creativity—now it's their turn to carry the enterprise while the churches dust themselves off, bandage their wounds, and get used to the new life of freedom.

We are created with an emptiness, a yearning, a longing deep inside us. "My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water," the ancient Psalmist wrote. It is a common idea in the Psalter—"My soul thirsts for the living God," the human heart pines for God, yearns for God, longs for God.

Blaise Pascal, philosopher, concluded that there is a God-shaped empty space in every human heart. In his recent biography of Saint Augustine, Garry Wills observes that the brilliant thinker was a tireless seeker who was never satisfied, that he paced about as he dictated to his copyists and stenographers, that there was an intellectual restlessness about him and an attraction to mystery. "Thou hast created us restless, O God," he wrote, "until we find our rest in thee."

But sometimes we have a lot of trouble acknowledging our thirst for God, our need, our yearning. Sometimes we attempt to satisfy it with inadequate substitutes. Observers of our culture suggest that while Marxism proposed that party ideology would replace faith, and the classless society would make the church irrelevant, our consumer culture tries to fill the God-sized space in the human heart with consumer goods, stuff.

But it doesn't work. And it doesn't work because God has created that restlessness in us, that yearning, impatient longing.

One of the wisest among us, the late Thomas Merton, once said, "We cannot find him unless we know we need him." Our thirst begins to be satisfied, that is to say, when we learn to say, "I'm thirsty." But it's not easy to do—to acknowledge our need, our limitations, our incompleteness—particularly for church people.

Writer Phil Yancey, who grew up in a Dutch Reformed family in Michigan, remembers: "My own church tended toward perfectionism. On Sundays our well-scrubbed families emerged from their cars smiling even though, as we later found out, they had been fighting all week long." "The hard lesson," Yancey says, "was not dressing up and being good for God, but an honest acknowledgement of need, emptiness, thirst." (See *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p.248-9) "We have within us," C. S. Lewis wrote, "a life-long nostalgia, a longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off." (See *Weavings*; July-August, 2000, from *Mere Christianity*, and *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*)

I think you and I know what that means: that even if we have never acknowledged it directly, we have experienced that life-long nostalgia, that restlessness, that thirst. I think that is why we come here on Sunday morning.

Did you ever wonder why Jesus seemed to prefer the company of poor people and outcasts and sinners to the company of the respectable, upright and well to do? It's a distressingly consistent reality about the Gospel story that makes me uncomfortable when I think about it for long. The people around Jesus are not the kind of people you ordinarily find in church—the poor, the marginal—socially and morally—the sinners.

But those were the very ones whose company he seemed to prefer. He treated sinners much more gently than saints—and I think the reason is that sinners know their limits, their need; sinners are quick to confess that they don't have all the answers, aren't always right—sinners are not so morally proud that they marginalize their less moral neighbors as pious church people often do.

Sinners are able to say, "I'm thirsty," instead of "I'm right and you're wrong, morally and theologically. I'm going to heaven but you're going to hell unless you become like me."

Think of how gently he treated that infamous woman at the well one time. Samaritans were regarded as impure, immoral, imposters. There was no love lost between neighbors—on either side. There he was—at a Samaritan well and here she comes in the heat of the day. She's not supposed to be there. He's not supposed to talk to her in public, even to acknowledge her presence. And when they talk, he discovers the reason she is there in the heat of midday and not in the evening when the other women go to the well. She has had five husbands, three more than the law allowed and she was not married to the man with whom she was currently living. Did you notice what he did not say? He did not say, "Young woman, do you realize what an immoral thing you are doing?" He said, in effect, "I sense you are very thirsty," and the woman's redemption, her reconciliation to herself, to God, begins when she can acknowledge her thirst and asks for the living water—the unconditional love and acceptance and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

There is a thirst in the human soul for that—for the wholeness and at-one-ness and at-homeness that comes when we know ourselves loved and forgiven and accepted and appreciated and wanted and delighted in and the promise is that when we acknowledge our thirst, our need, our own limitations and inadequacies—we have already begun to satisfy our thirst. "Our yearning anticipates landfall," Augustine wrote. "Our yearning . . . throws hope as an anchor toward that shore."

It begins when we know our thirst, our need for God, our restlessness. For many, for me—that acknowledgement, that throwing out the anchor toward shore comes through the arts, through music, particularly.

It is music that stops me in my tracks and reminds me of the mystery, the transcendent, the reality that is greater than my reality. It is the great music of the faith that startles me into recognition or slows me down. God, I conclude, uses music to grab us by the scruff of the neck and say, "I'm here. Slow down. Look—see—taste—feel—listen and know that without this—without me, you are incomplete."

We visited the concentration camp and museum at Terezien, near Prague. There the Nazis gathered Jews and other despised minorities for deportation to slave labor factories, medical experiments and extermination camps. And even there, prisoners brought their musical instruments and paints and pallets and poetry notebooks. String quartets played and recitals were presented and poetry written and little children on their way to the gas chambers drew pictures of butterflies and flowers and the golden sun shining in a brilliant blue sky on gray prison walls. And afterward, in the silence on the bus, the minister was supposed to say something; only he couldn't; in fact could only think:

"My soul thirsts for you,
my flesh faints for you
as in a dry and weary land
where there is no water."

And instead of talking, explaining, simply put a C.D. in the player and filled the bus with the only thing that seemed to make any sense at all—music, the music of J. S. Bach.

Thanks be to God for that gift. Thanks be to God for that restlessness created in us. Thanks be to God for the yearning of the human spirit expressed so magnificently in the arts.

Thanks be to God for moments of honest acknowledgement when you and I—you and I can say:

“How lovely, Lord Is your abiding place;
My soul is longing, fainting, To feast upon your grace.

Amen.